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AUTHOR Mauk, John
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ABSTRACT

For a growing student demographic, college is not an intellectual or residential destination; rather, it is an intellectual errand. Students are, in the most existential sense, "already gone." For commuter students, academia is "unsituated." That is, they experience academia as moments scattered throughout a day or week. In short, today's college students are, more and more, intellectual commuters. This paper discusses this phenomenon as it is manifested in two-year and four-year colleges. According to the paper, given this trend, it has become important for teachers in higher education to begin exploring what happens when a college career, traditionally conceived as a time and space of intellectual immersion, and traditionally lived out within a particular kind of (situating) geography, is defined by a state of constant movement away from campus. The paper poses the following question: What happens to writing pedagogy, and the practices of learning to write, in the absence of traditional university pedagogy, or in the presence of unsituated academic space? It states that in composition studies, educators need to recognize the spatial complexities that define students' lives, but not in order to vanquish those complexities, to wish them away, but to include them in the understanding of how to write. The paper offers several writing assignments which invite students to see themselves, their own bodies, as the intersection between academia and non-academic life. It states that academic third space prompts educators to see students' non-academic lives as generative, not as something to work against--or even something to objectify and exploit--but as a realm of potential action and discourse. (Contains 9 endnotes and a 10-item selected bibliography.) (NKA)

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Academic Third Space: An Emerging Classroom Geography for 21st Century Students.

By John Mauk

Paper presented at the National Council of Teachers of English Spring Conference (Portland, OR, March 6-9, 2002)

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Academic Third Space:
An Emerging Classroom Geography for 21st Century Students

On community colleges and universities alike, college students are increasingly part-time and increasingly transient. For a growing student demographic, college is not an intellectual or residential destination; rather, it is an intellectual errand (slightly more important than picking up milk on the way home, but slightly less important than picking up the kids from daycare). In short, students are already leaving before they come in the door; they've already left their syllabi in their backseats before they've signed up for the course. They are, in the most existential sense, *already gone.*

This condition is nowhere more pronounced than at two-year commuter colleges, which consistently enroll over one third of the nation's college students.[i] For commuter students academia is *unsituated*. That is, students experience academia as moments scattered throughout a day or week. At a typical commuter campus, even the geography offers an unsituated expression of academia.[ii] The campus is organized for the needs of the student who is coming and going. Parking lots, rather than grassy malls, lie between buildings, and small in-roads connect different parts of campus. Most often, there are no dormitories, and so there is no residential quality to the campus—or to the surrounding area. The entire space says, in effect, 'thanks for coming; drive carefully.' The campus is only a stop, an element in a broader spatiality constituted by the commute itself and some other (final) destination. Coming to campus, then, is a pronouncement of coming *and going*.

At the traditional four-year university, where large numbers of students live on campus, the geography produces and is produced by prevailing notions of a *situated academia*.[iii] That is, the campus generates, and is supported by, a residential state of being. The campus is a center of academic practice; students move from other neighborhoods, towns, states and countries to reside within that particular space. The buildings are arranged to afford an entire continuum of social

needs: formal and informal modes of work and play, both study and recreation. Parking lots, for the most part, do not intermingle with buildings, walkways and malls so the acts of coming and going are outside of the main parts of campus. The geography of the campus says, in effect, 'you're staying;' it is part of a prevailing notion about being in that particular space, a residential consciousness, even for those individuals who reside off-campus.[iv]

On residential campuses, behavioral patterns and social rituals help to maintain a situated consciousness which, in turn, helps to maintain the actual, physical situatedness of the campus. For example, the mass migration to a residential campus in late summer, when the town is over-wrought with traffic, and the campus parking lots are filled with packed vehicles and confused newcomers, helps to establish a particular residential consciousness. The ritual migration into the place creates the ontological distinction of that place. The ritual of coming to campus, then, might be seen as a ritual of be-coming part of academic space.

Despite the geography of the traditional residential campus, outside of the green lawns and ivory towers breathes a fragmented and fragmenting, transient, can-I-get-that-to-go, drive-thru, get-a-car-with-no-money-down society. College students are increasingly apt to have vehicles and increasingly apt to drive them, and therefore, increasingly apt to have jobs to pay for gas and insurance. In short, today's college students are, more and more, intellectual commuters. Their lives are dispersed—spread out across the paved landscape and 70 mph highways. But academia is, in many ways, still located in buildings—which ultimately get left behind in the exhaust fumes of on-the-go student population. (The same can be argued about K-12 students in an increasingly transient world. High school writing faculty, with whom I worked in a recent workshop, explained that one of the most significant concerns they have about their students is that they are increasingly "on the go" in a "hurried," "fast-paced, "fragmented," "postmodern" society.)

Given this trend, I think it has become important for teachers in higher education to begin exploring what happens when a college career, traditionally conceived as a time and space of intellectual immersion, and traditionally lived out within a particular kind of (situating) geography, is defined by a state of constant movement away from campus. More specifically, we might begin asking the question: What happens to writing pedagogy, and the practices of learning to write, in the absence of traditional university geography, or in the presence of unsituated academic space?[v]

Now Entering/Leaving Nowhereville
Population: Nobody

At my college, the faculty often seemed to be playing academic "Where's Waldo." It seemed that the Gordon[vi] students were everywhere except in the academic institution. It seemed as though they were merely passing through campus to some other destination. As one instructor, Karen, explained, her composition students were steeped in daily goings-on which consistently took priority over writing:

> ...almost all our [Gordon] students are parents. I mean, how can I sit here and say, `you have to have this composition done,' when somebody's like...`my kid was in the hospital.' I mean come on. So their lives have other planes that are much bigger than college. And this wasn't the case at [two state universities] where most of my students were eighteen years old, just out of high school...still living at home...[not] worrying about rent...or children...and they could focus more on college.

According to Karen, academia was only a marginal component in her students' lives. They were already being pulled away from academia, from the composition class, before they even entered the door. The *other* places, which drew students away from college, the would-be intellectual center of

their lives, had already crystallized their identities as mothers, fathers, laborers, managers, business owners, skater punks, farmers and fulltime slackers—all of which seemed contrary to traditional student subjectivity. Like many of the instructors at Gordon, Karen understood that her students were indifferent to college—or at least, less inspired by learning than she had been as a college student. While sitting in her classroom, Karen's students had somewhere, and someone, else to be. And their inclination to be elsewhere manifested itself in writing assignments:

> They have a hard time finding the time to make [writing] a process. We can say, `writing is a process' until we're purple, but when people have a full-time job, all these kids, three other classes... finding time to make it a real process is difficult. They sit down and crank it out the night before because that's all the time they got.

As Karen's rendering of her students suggests, the Gordon writing faculty and its students were experiencing a clash of expectations. The traditional wisdom of writing pedagogy seemed useless. For example, process pedagogy[vii], which suggests that students should experience writing as a recursive set of behaviors that evolve into increasingly focused discourse, assumes, at the very least, that students have time to invest themselves in such an act. But students at Gordon did not, often could not, envision themselves engaged in such activity. Their lives, quite often, acted against the possibility of such an idea. Another composition instructor, Zena, put it succinctly: "it is difficult for [students] to understand the nature of a process if that process is broken up because of lack of attendance."

Commuter students (and instructors) share a sense of dispersion—of coming and going. For commuters, academic space is not contained, made to appear coherent, within a particular place. It

is dispersed throughout students' (and teachers') lives, scattered among car drives, bus rides, babysitting, and multiple jobs. And, within the centrifugal dynamics of such space, a sense of where is far more difficult to generate or acquire. From the teacher's perspective, it is difficult to create a discursive context (which corresponds to a material reality) for a diverse group of commuters who are always on their way off campus to some where else. From the student perspective, it is difficult to transport a sense of location out of a classroom and into the spaces of non-academic daily life.

What our increasingly on-the-go, everywhere-else-but-school students require is a way to make sense of the particular academic space that surrounds their own writing and thinking. And instructors need some theoretical/practical tools for making sense of the increasingly widening gap between traditional academic space and centrifugal student life.

Now Entering Third Space

As the part-time/commuter college student becomes more prevalent, academic space is being transformed. It is increasingly a space that is left behind—not resided in. Quite simply, students are spending increasingly less time in traditional college space. However, this need not be a liability for college students and instructors. Rather, it may be an opportunity to imagine and create a new kind of academic space. Students need to conceive the space outside of the campus, outside of the classroom, as academic. And, academia needs to be conceived as transportable and transmutable—as something that is tied to being, rather than to exclusive material surroundings. Academic space must extend itself—not merely outward, but in all the directions of being which constitute the lives of students.

Several composition scholars (such as Nedra Renolds and Kristie Fleckenstein)

have begun exploring how space or geography impacts the acts of writing. In my exploration I turned to the field of geography, and specifically, to critical geographer Edward Soja who offers a particularly novel theoretical tool: *third space*.[viii] Soja suggests that third space is both the lived space of our material lives and conceived or imagined space. It is "simultaneously real and imagined," where "things and thought" are on equal terms, where consciousness, sociality, and space are bound together.[ix] A*cademic third space*, then, is where academia fuses with the everywhere-else of student life.

In composition studies, we need to recognize the spatial complexities that define our students' (and our own) lives, but not in order to vanquish those complexities, to wish them away, but to include them in our understanding of how to write. If what it means to write is synonymous with what it means to write in a particular place (as Nedra Reynolds argues), then composition instructors (and the entire field of composition studies) need to become critical geographers. We need to understand what kinds of real and imagined spaces are "out there," beyond academia, what kinds of spaces constitute being "in here" (within the regions of academia), and what kinds of spaces are created at the intersection.

Students, themselves, in an academic third space *are* the intersection of academic and non-academic spaces. This is the gist of Kristie Fleckenstein's somatic mind which makes the student body the vortex of meaning-making). In such a space, students might be prompted to use academic tools to discover meaning in everyday life, and to bring everyday life into academia. For composition students, the act of writing must be contextualized by students' academic and non-academic lives. For example, in my Composition 111 courses, students are asked to write an argument paper, a standard assignment for first-year college writing courses. They are asked to read a variety of essays on education in America. And in what amounts to standard practice for writing

pedagogy, the students then have in-class group discussions about the issues raised in the essays, a necessary step for establishing a rhetorical context for their own positions. Students then carry the discussion with them out of the classroom, into the places which constitute their non-academic lives. They interview at least ten people (who consistently share in their daily lives at home, work, etc.) about the issues raised in the essays and class discussions. The information/opinions from these interviews are then reported to the class, and used as part of their arguments—as evidence of opinion. The writing prompts do not simply ask students to "form an opinion" but to argue for or against the validity of others' opinions.

Such an assignment invites students to see themselves, their own bodies, as the intersection between academia and non-academic life. It provides a conceptual place (a topic) while also prompting students to make meaning out of the people-places that constitute their lives. More assignments which provide such conceptual-material space might resemble the following:

- A "Critique" essay assignment prompts students to formally evaluate a short expository text on the nature of work in American culture. In addition to formally analyzing the features of the text, students are to argue for the validity of the claims made based on their experiences at work. Students are prompted to interview people at their places of employment, asking co-workers to respond to claims made in the text.

- An "Investigation" or "Explaining" assignment begins with readings on political action. The students are prompted to find the names of city, district, state and federal officials elected to serve their communities. Then they are prompted to write a brief paper which explains how an average citizen can correspond with government officials. The final step might, then, be to deliver this information on fliers to their neighbors.

- A community situation attracts a class of students who explore possible meanings: they discuss the situation with peers and conduct surveys in the community. They email acquaintances to elicit opinions. Individually or collectively, they consider how writing might emerge from their "foot" work: perhaps they write stories, propose solutions, argue positions, or write explanatory letters to editors. (The act of choosing a medium and a purpose would, in itself, offer valuable insight for the students.)

The important feature of such assignments is that students are agents of academic behaviors: they are not merely writing about their lives outside of academic setting, but are using academic tools within their non-academic lives—and not simply to generate topics, but to develop and critique ideas. Other strategies include outside reading (students collect and bring readings into the classroom for others), non-classmate peer review, and collaborative reading/discussion assignments which prompt the students to critique an essay with non-classmates. (The assumption here is that our students' peers extend far beyond classrooms. And the message for each assignment is that *because you are now a college student, your everyday life will change in dramatic ways.*)

Academic third space prompts us to see our students' non-academic lives as generative, not as something to work against—or even something to objectify and exploit—but as a realm of potential action and discourse. Academic third space prompts us to see the acts of reading and writing being smeared across the nooks and crannies of everyday life. And in that process, both academia and student life will transform.

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Notes

[i] See *The Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac: 2001-2002.*

[ii] Certainly, characterizing an entire space as situated or unsituated tends toward essentialism. And the above descriptions are not intended to catagorize community colleges as unsituated, and universities as situated academic sapce; nor do I want to construct a clear distinction between situated and unsituated space. As I explain in the following section, every place is filled with multiple projections about its qualities, and those projections (and the qualities themselves) are dynamic, shifting endlessly.

[iii] In using the term, "situated," I do not mean to invoke the poststructuralist debate about situated or foundational knowledge (see Stanley Fish, "Anti-Foundationalism, Theory Hope, and the Teaching of Composition"). While the relationship between geographical situatedness and disciplinary situatedness is at the center of my argument in this chapter, the pertinent issue here is not so much the epistemology of different disciplines, but the broader context of the academic setting.

[iv] Of course, I do not mean to suggest that all students at a residential university experience this situatedness. My claims here are not so much about individual consciousness, but about prevailing spatialities—which give way to, and are supported by, the ways in which individuals experience a sense place.

[v] I am suggesting here that unsituated academic space is not necessarily a lack of situated space. It is not an empty space; rather, it is filled with the discourses of distanciation and dislocation.

[vi] The names of the college and all individuals have been changed.

[vii] The process movement, which gained status and momentum in the 1970's, highlights the individual cognitive processes that writers use in composing. Janet Emig's The Composing Process of Twelfth Graders is often seen as the first major publication of the process movement. Although many criticisms of process pedagogy have come in the past twenty years (see Miller's Textual Carnivals), it still has significant residual effects on composition programs, textbooks, and classroom teaching. Many, perhaps most, composition instructors, for instance, assume that successful student writers follow a set of distinct and nameable cognitive behaviors in generating text. Consequently, many composition courses and textbooks are arranged around an assumed pattern of composing.

[viii] Critical geographers such as Soja explore the problems and possibilities of space and identity. They ask the kinds of questions about space and everyday existence which, I believe, should be asked about education—in a society with a dramatically evolving geography.

[ix] And, in that union, these phenomena are generative; they make life what it is. In other words, they are the basis of ontology, or for Soja, "spatialized ontology" (See Soja, Postmodern Geographies, 131-7). Third space, then, generates possibilities of acting and of knowing; it associates individuals with others, with particular location, and with the possibilities of acting therein.